



**Connecticut Conference  
United Church of Christ**

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Testimony in support of SB 280 An Act Revising the Penalty for Capital Felonies  
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Throughout my forty years in pastoral ministry, I have argued against the death penalty. In that long period, hundreds of people have been executed. In Connecticut, the debate rages on. The 2010 state legislative session voted to repeal the death penalty only to have their decision vetoed by then Governor M. Jodi Rell. New repeal legislation will be debated this session. So, another opportunity to consider the issue is offered. Few concerns are more worthy of review by people of faith. I urge study groups and programs in our congregations.

What justifies the taking of the life of someone accused of a heinous crime? I cannot find a faithful rationale. Granted, some crimes are unspeakably horrible. My heart goes out to the Cheshire family whose lives were brutally taken in an afternoon of pure evil. But how does the taking of the lives of the perpetrators atone for the damage done? "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life" only leaves everyone maimed or dead.

This conclusion may have influenced Jesus' new teachings. Considering the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," in the context of his society, he likely saw that killing only made things worse. Gandhi adopted a pure pacifist position against all war and violence, no matter how well justified by context. Jesus extended the prohibition against murder to prohibition against anger. God's forgiveness and grace are available to everyone who sincerely repents. Jesus did not promise that discipleship would be easy.

Capital punishment presents a justice issue. It is no accident that the majority of those who have been executed are from minority communities where poverty and substance abuse are rampant. Economic injustice is an incubator for violence. Recent media reports assert that one in three Black young men will be incarcerated sometime during late adolescence or early adulthood. And these are the very people who cannot afford quality legal representation, leading to often ill-trained and overburdened public defenders taking their cases. New DNA testing has revealed that false convictions and executions are not uncommon. We will never know how many innocent lives have been taken.

It is commonly assumed that capital punishment deters violent crime. This belief has long been discredited by the facts. Study after study has shown that, in states with the death penalty, there is no correlation between the death penalty and the number of capital crimes.

Human life is cheapened for all of us when we turn our backs on Jesus' teaching and the sociological facts concerning the death penalty. Fear and emotional reactions to ugly crimes must not lead us to lash out in anger. For the well-being of our families, communities and ourselves, prayer and clear thinking must finally govern our decision on the death penalty- and hopefully lead us to express our views to elected officials and work with the growing effort in our state to influence the outcome of the next votes.

And if we are tempted to sit this one out, two questions plead for consideration. The first is, What would Jesus say? And the second, What protections would we want if we were falsely accused of a capital crime?



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